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AUTHOR Avakian, A. Nancy; Lipsett, Laurence
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ABSTRACT

Models for assessing prior learning or noncollege learning are discussed. The increasing variety of interests, ages, and levels of maturity among prospective college students requires that higher education institutions face the issue of granting credit for noncollege learning. It is suggested that the key issue for colleges and universities is how to recognize the learning that takes place, how much credit to award, and a lack of funds to carry out the process. Examinations are discussed as a means of awarding credit for work done outside the confines of a traditional college or university. Special evaluation by a panel of experts may also be used. Individualized degree programs are also discussed as offering opportunities for noncollege learning. The use of a student portfolio from which the learning component of the experience can be assessed is described. A sample degree program designed by a 50-year-old student is provided and the awarding of credit for the student's prior learning is explained. The role of evaluators (institution faculty and outside evaluators) is also discussed as well as ideas on how to finance assessment expenses. Advantages and disadvantages of noncollege learning are discussed for both the student and the institution. It is suggested that an institution that grants standing for noncollege learning will be able to recruit more students and enroll a heterogeneous student body. (SF)

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Mary Corcoran
University of Minnesota
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ASSESSMENT OF NONCOLLEGE LEARNING

A. Nancy Avakian
Assistant Vice Chancellor
for Academic Affairs
University of Missouri-St. Louis
8001 Natural Bridge Road
St. Louis, Missouri 63121
314-453-0111

Laurence Lipsett
Professor
Empire State College
8 Prince Street
Rochester, New York 14607
516-244-3601

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Abstract

A growing number of institutions of higher education are facing the issue of granting credit for noncollege learning because they are committed to responding to interest, ages, and levels of maturity of prospective students. The two most common problems associated with crediting experiential learning are related to the process and procedure involved in the assessment of noncollege learning and the lack of financial resources. This study identifies various models for assessing prior learning, including procedures, frameworks, criteria, means of evaluation and personnel. Alternative sources for funding are also identified. Advantages and disadvantages of each model are presented.

Need and Rationale

Many individuals who have training in areas such as prenursery school education, electronics, or management skills have visited admissions offices in institutions of higher education to inquire about receiving credit or advanced standing for their learning. The usual reply is that the college has no means for evaluating prospective students' competencies outside of the usual route of enrolling in a class and passing a final examination. Some admissions offices may suggest that the prospective student take a competency examination such as one offered by the College-Level Equivalency Program (CLEP) of the Educational Testing Service or by the College Proficiency Examination Program (CPEP) of New York State. However, they warn that there may be a limit to the number of credits from proficiency examinations which the college is willing to accept. The student who chooses not to take the examination may enroll reluctantly in an introductory course in theories of early childhood development, basic electronics or business management. How often then have we heard

the student complain, "Why must I sit in that course? I already know the subject matter and probably have had more experiences than the instructor anyway."

Educational institutions have established a lock-step process whereby a student can earn a college degree by accruing credits gained for spending prescribed numbers of hours in classrooms. This has been a satisfactory convenience for society to deal with the compliant student who moves in a timely sequence from high school through college. However, this pattern is inadequate for the returning veteran, for the woman who plans to continue her education after an interruption for motherhood, or for the individual who, having started a small business, wants to study for a college degree on a part-time basis.

At a time when enrollment of students in the 18-22 year old age range is declining because of population birthrate trends, adults are showing increasing interest in continuing their learning. At Florida International University, for example, the average age of the student body is 27 years; and, at Empire State College, the college-without-walls of the State University of New York, 34 years. The average age of the student body in special adult degree program at Adelphi University is 42 years (Meyer, 1975, p. 11). A college concerned about maintaining or increasing its enrollment must decide whether or not it wishes to accommodate older students who constitute an increasing percentage of the college population. These students are likely to have accomplished learnings at least as worthy as they might have had they attended formal classes in freshman composition, western civilization, or introduction to sociology.

Hundreds of colleges offer credit for field experiences or list honors programs with independent study components. Willingham's survey of 266 colleges found that 85 percent reported credit-bearing programs

of work experiences (Willingham and Burns, 1974). Crediting nonclassroom learning appears to be no longer a novelty. A key issue for colleges to face is how to recognize the learning that takes place and how much credit to award. Although credit for noncollege learning can be accommodated, to some extent, in a basically traditional curriculum, it may be easier in the more flexible nontraditional program. A survey of 1,184 institutions with nontraditional programs found that the soundness of granting credit for noncollege learning was not a central problem (Cross and Valley, 1973, p. 84). Difficulties perceived by these institutions were related to: 1) the procedures involved in the assessment of experiential learning; and 2) lack of funds to carry out the process. This paper proposes solutions for both of these problems.

Frameworks for Assessment

There are many acceptable measures that may be considered equitable and relevant frameworks for assessment. Existing curricula are hardly questioned by educators in traditional institutions as frameworks for assessing prior learnings. If, for example, a student can pass the final examination of a course, the grade may serve as sufficient evidence of competence. This approach, used for many years by several colleges with small numbers of students seeking advanced standing, requires little adjustment of philosophy or technique.

Until recently, standardized examinations had been the principal media for evaluating prior experiential learning. In 1973-74 nearly 300,000 CLEP examinations were administered in 44 subject areas. CLEP examinations measure learning only in subject areas in which there is widespread agreement about a common core of content and in which there are enough candidates to justify the expense involved in creating an

examination. In addition to subject area examinations, CLEP offers general tests in English composition, mathematics, natural science, humanities, social sciences and history.

Existing specialized courses in either occupational studies or liberal arts subjects may also be used as frameworks for granting credit. Students may demonstrate their achievements through written or oral examinations, artistic performances or completed products. The criteria for evaluating noncollege learning differ from criteria for classroom learning only in emphasis. For example, when examining poetry, musical compositions or paintings of a "nontraditional student," the same criteria of form, design, line, etc., used to evaluate the artistic products of traditional students can be applied. If 15 acceptable poems are expected at the end of a semester course in creative writing, the same number and quality of poems written by a student independent of the classroom may be used as the basis for granting credit equivalent to the semester course. When assessing an individual's mastery of knowledge in areas such as history, anthropology, or statistics, factors of accuracy, depth and breadth of knowledge may be applied as criteria.

In some instances a special evaluation by a panel of experts may be arranged. For example, a candidate who is a prospective vocational education teacher may request credit for competency in automotive technology. A panel consisting of individuals with expertise in that subject matter is convened to recommend the maximum amount of credit which might be awarded for competencies they identify. After the panel agrees on a specific number of credits allowed, a special examination is arranged and the candidate may demonstrate his or her level of competence.

Whenever colleges offer individualized degree programs, opportunities for crediting noncollege learning are available more readily. For example, at Empire State College or Minnesota Metropolitan College, an

upper-division college, a student may design an individualized degree program in which prior learning as well as proposed learning to be undertaken are identified. The student should state long-range educational goals since the request for noncollege learning credit must be relevant to his or her unique degree program. Components of learning in the major area(s) of the student's concentration must be identified along with studies in general education and possible electives. After academic and/or career exploration and consultation with a faculty advisor, the student presents a portfolio to a committee composed of faculty members and an administrator. The portfolio outlines the components of learning for which credit is requested and includes a thorough description of the experiential learning. Credit is given for the learning component of the experience, not for the experience per se. Supporting documentation must also be submitted. These may include diplomas or certificates earned, letters from previous employers or other individuals acquainted with the student's learning, licenses, memberships in trade or professional associations, completed products such as poems, paintings, or tapes of music performances.

Students may apply for credit in a variety of fields. A review of the degree program of 138 students at Empire State College revealed that the five most frequently cited areas of learning for which credit was awarded were business/management/administration, community organization and services, arts and crafts, human services, nursing, and writing/editing/journalism.

The degree program outlined in Table 1 was submitted by Mr. A., a 50 year old student at Empire State College, who was seeking a baccalaureate degree concentrating in math/science and educational studies. He planned to continue his education studies in graduate school before entering the teaching profession. He transferred 80 semester hours of traditional

TABLE 1

COMPONENTS OF THE DEGREE PROGRAM

A. ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR COLLEGE-LEVEL LEARNING

1. Transcript Credit

SOURCE (and Year)	CONCENTRATION	GENERAL LEARNING	CREDITS
_____ College 1944-1946		English (12 sem. hrs.) German (9 sem. hrs.) Art Appreciation (3 sem. hrs.) Music (6 sem. hrs.) History (9 sem. hrs.) Religion (6 sem. hrs.) Intro. to Sociology (4 sem. hrs.) Intro. to Psychology (3 sem. hrs.)	52
	Calculus (3 sem. hrs.) Botany (4 sem. hrs.) Chemistry (6 sem. hrs.)		
_____ University 1947-1961	Alg. & Plane & Spherical Trig. (3 sem. hrs.) Modern Secondary School Curriculum (Physics, 6 sem. hrs.) Differential Calculus (3 sem. hrs.) Educational Psychology (3 sem. hrs.)		28

2. Non-College Learning

F.C.C. Amateur Radio Service 1949 to present		Electronics: Theory and practice, antenna theory and practice; use of amateur radio as Public Service Emergency Medium	4
_____ High School Assistant Teacher	Education: Classroom organization, adolescent psychology, teaching skills, development of lesson plans in science and mathematics, individualized instruction (particularly in laboratory)		4
_____ Optical Laboratory Assistant Director 1968-1972		Physics: Crystal growth, development of crystal growth systems, close-up science photography; bibliographic skills for scientific research	8
PTA President School 14 1969-1970		Community Service: Parliamentary Procedure, leadership, community organization, group dynamics, decision-making process	4

B. PROPOSED LEARNING

Empire State College	Educational Tests and Measurement	4
	Educational Research	4
	Drug Education	4
	Problems in Secondary School Education	4
	Computer-Aided Instruction	4
	Educational Philosophy	4
	Educational Sociology	4
	TOTAL	128

studies completed at a university. Fifty-two credits were in general learning; the remaining 28 credits were in his areas of concentration: math/science studies and educational studies.

Mr. A. was awarded the equivalent of 20 semester hours in toto for his experiential learnings in electronics, education, physics, and community organization. Since Mr. A. had an amateur radio operator's license he received four hours of credit for his knowledge of electronics theory and antenna theory. In addition he demonstrated practical experience as an amateur radio operator. He also identified some learning components derived from his experiences as a high school assistant teacher. These included classroom organization, adolescent psychology, teaching skills, development of lesson plans and individualized instruction. For his experiences as an assistant director in an optical laboratory, Mr. A. asked for credit for knowledge of crystal growth and crystal growth systems. He also demonstrated knowledge of scientific photography. Parliamentary procedures, principles of leadership, community organization, group dynamics and decision-making were skills he learned during his tenure as PTA president and member of a neighborhood organization.

The portfolio included prior learning both from transcript credit earned at other institutions and from work experiences. Mr. A. proposed 32 hours of additional educational studies to complete his degree work. The proposed degree program was submitted to a four member committee consisting of three faculty members and an associate dean. The faculty members served on a rotating basis, usually three months; the associate dean was the permanent member of the committee. Each member of the committee had an opportunity to study the portfolio prior to the meeting.

Mr. A. was present at the assessment meeting in the event more information or further qualification was necessary. His portfolio included a 25-page, well written essay, copies of transcripts from the

institutions of higher education he had attended, verifications of his work experiences, and evaluations of learnings from supervisors and other individuals knowledgeable in electronics and social service works. Documents verifying each learning component were complete; qualifications of employers and other outside evaluators who assessed his noncollege learning were substantiated.

Evaluators

If faculty members are called upon to assess noncollege learning, they may feel they have not only "legitimized" the process, but have contributed to its growth and acceptance. The most prevalent misconception which faculty must overcome is that learning occurs by some mystical process of osmosis when an individual attends a class. Its corollary contends that collegiate-level learning cannot be attained fully or measured adequately by any means other than end-of-semester examinations. If the admissions office assesses prior nonclassroom learning without involving the faculty, it is not unreasonable to think that the faculty are likely to oppose decisions dictated by the admissions office. Although evaluations by different faculty members may, to a degree, prove to be inconsistent, it may be countered that even when different professors grade the same paper or when different professors teach the same course from the same textbook, grading practices and results may be inconsistent.

Special outside evaluators may be hired for the express purpose of assessing students' noncollege learnings. The evaluators may exhibit special skills in this process and may achieve consistency through sharing ideas and practices. Nonetheless, faculty may, again, be hesitant to accept evaluations of specialists, even if the evaluators are from the admissions offices of their own institutions.

Financing

There are several models which may be followed in order to finance assessment expenses. The full cost of a course enrollment may be charged to a student who challenges the course examination. Or, a college may follow the practice of the New York State Regents' External Degree Program and levy a fee of $150 for special assessment in each area of learning presented by a candidate. One innovative institution charges a fee in proportion to the amount of credit requested. When Empire State College was founded, an assessment fee was absorbed in the tuition; later a flat fee of $250 was charged regardless of the amount of credit requested. That fee has been subsequently reduced.

Although public institutions may feel legal or political constraints regarding assessment fees, the cost for the practice must be assumed somewhere. An informal survey indicated that a high percentage of students are "willing to pay several hundred dollars" to have experiential learning evaluated for college credit. In some instances, students may tap state or federal financial assistance programs to cover assessment fees.

Even if a substantial fee is charged for evaluation it is usually lower than the tuition and college fees that would be charged for equivalent course enrollment. While public institutions may have problems in levying assessment fees that fully cover the costs involved in evaluating noncollege learning, private colleges may have opportunities not only to make full recovery of costs but also to develop fiscal surpluses. Assessment fees should reflect the cost of administrative overhead, secretarial assistance, and services of evaluators and committee members.

If a faculty member is called upon infrequently to make a special assessment, a financial bonus or acknowledgement of the overload in work

may be an active incentive. On the other hand, the faculty member who experiences a major shift of responsibilities from traditional teaching duties to assessment of noncollege learning may need to negotiate with the institution's administration in order to adjust workload and financial equity.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Earning credit for nonacademic collegiate level learning can be highly advantageous to a student. The elimination of needless repetition in coursework alleviates possibilities of boredom and holds prospects for greater creativity. It also represents substantial savings in time and money for the student. Granting credit for noncollege learning may enable a student to individualize his or her degree program and to complete a degree or continue pursuit of an educational objective while maintaining an established living pattern which may include family or work obligations. If there is a disadvantage, it may be that the temptation of obtaining a degree too readily precludes a student from exploring new areas of study.

Institutions, on the other hand, may exhibit mixed reactions. They recognize that credit for noncollege learning can reduce the frustration of students who are forced to attend classes in subject areas they have already mastered. Individualized degree programs can attract and encourage more creative and purposeful students. Awarding advanced standing may mean that more students who graduate each year will hopefully become contributing alumni. Nonetheless, the lost income from tuition, fees, and room and board may necessitate adjustment of the institution's budget to reflect changed patterns of enrollment.

Although there are usually a few administrators and faculty members who are willing to explore the idea of crediting noncollege learning,

innovation is not necessarily the forte of the typical college professor. Granting credit for nonclassroom learning may be perceived as a threat to employment, as well as a denigration of the traditional faculty role. Several counter arguments may be offered. Recent high school graduates who will continue to make up the bulk of the undergraduate population usually have not had substantial noncollege learning experiences to apply for advanced standing. Admissions officers may point out that a new group of individuals, such as military personnel or adult learners, may be attracted to the college, thus widening the scope of the institution's services. Declining enrollments may be reversed. Faculty members may find the new student clientele to be an incentive which encourages their professional development in research and in teaching.

Issues

Once an institution decides that granting college credit for noncollege learning is legitimate and desirable, the process must be espoused by everyone involved, i.e., admissions officers, administrators and faculty. Obtaining the complete support of an entire faculty for a new concept is difficult; therefore, initially, it may be more feasible to limit the practice of crediting noncollege learning to a single department or division within an institution. The success of a small program may be eventually adopted by an entire institution. It is suggested that the individuals responsible for developing the assessment process become familiar with practices followed in other institutions and with the work of the project in Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL), a joint effort of the Educational Testing Services and 160 higher education institutions throughout the nation to promote the concept of assessment of noncollege learning.

Several issues must be addressed when an institution assesses noncollege learning:

1) What will be the framework(s) for assessment? Existing courses, occupational competency, general education, individualized degree programs?

2) What criteria will be used? Will they be different from existing criteria for passing college courses?

3) What means of evaluation will be employed? Standardized examinations, special written examinations, performance tests, oral examinations, portfolios of evidence?

4) Who will conduct the evaluations? Existing faculty, specialists, separate evaluation units?

5) How will costs be underwritten? Student fees, institutional absorption?

An institution which grants advanced standing for noncollege learning will have little, if any, difficulty in recruiting new students. The enrollment will, most likely, reflect a heterogeneous student body with diverse interests, ages, abilities and talents.

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